

5 October 1986

SENATOR DOUBTS DECEPTION BY U.S.

By PHILIP SHENON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 4 — The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee says he does not believe the Reagan Administration organized a "disinformation" campaign designed to mislead American reporters about Libya and its leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

The chairman, Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, said in an interview that individual White House aides might instead have provided false or exaggerated information without approval from their superiors, leading to inaccurate reports about Libya by major news organizations last summer.

In an interview Friday night, the Senator said it would probably take a "quantum leap" to assume that the actions of a few White House aides last summer constituted a formal Administration policy of lying to American reporters.

His comments came after the publication of a report last Thursday in The Washington Post indicating that the White House had organized an elaborate campaign to spread false reports about Colonel Qaddafi and purported threats to his leadership. According to The Post, the false information began turning up, reported as fact, in several news articles.

Damage to Credibility

A senior White House official acknowledged Friday that recent disclosures about the Libya efforts had badly hurt the Administration's credibility with news organizations in the critical days before the Soviet-American summit meeting in Iceland this month.

Some members of Congress have said the Libya efforts could tarnish President Reagan's credibility with American allies and the public.

Senator Durenberger said his comments were based on information provided to him by the staff of the Intelligence Committee, which conducted a swift inquiry last week after The Post published its article.

The account in The Post said false information generated by an Administration campaign began appearing last August in a number of stories citing supposedly new evidence that Libya was facing domestic and external threats and that Colonel Qaddafi had renewed his support for international terrorism.

Memorandum Acknowledged

Administration officials have acknowledged that Adm. John M. Poin-dexter, Mr. Reagan's national security adviser, wrote a memorandum last summer in which the Administration was urged to make available false information designed to weaken Colonel Qaddafi.

In recent days, though, officials said the memorandum and a subsequent Presidential directive were not specific about how to conduct the campaign.

And they denied that the American press corps had been targeted. Instead, they said, the information was to be passed on to the foreign press.

Senator Durenberger indicated that American journalists could share some of the blame for exaggerated stories about Libya.

"There's been an environment in the last three, four years that I have noticed in which people are very ready to jump to conclusions," he said.

"The Washington journalism community is very confused on a variety of national security issues, all of which deal with counterterrorism or proxy wars, and the confusion is deepening," he said.

Aide Tells of Interviews

In a separate interview, Bernard F. McMahon, the Intelligence Committee's staff director, said that committee investigators conducted a series of interviews after the Post article appeared, and that they became convinced there had been no formal campaign of deception aimed at American reporters.

He said he believed the "implication" of the Post article was that "the National Security Council sat down and made a decision to deliberately place false stories."

He said he did not believe that had happened, although it was possible that Administration aides had exaggerated the evidence against Colonel Qaddafi. Mr. McMahon would not say who had been interviewed as part of the committee's swift inquiry.

Administration officials said the White House had asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation to locate the source of the article in The Post.

A special squad of F.B.I. agents specializing in leak investigations has also been ordered to find the source of an Aug. 25 article in The Wall Street Journal that was purportedly generated by the Administration campaign, the officials said.

They said the F.B.I. would almost certainly seek to interview Howard Teicher, a staff member of the National Security Council who was described by several officials as a chief source of the article in The Journal.

Mr. Teicher, a specialist on political-military affairs, has acknowledged that he talked to a reporter for the newspaper, officials said. But he reportedly added that The Journal already had obtained all of the basic information from other officials.

A spokesman for Mr. Teicher did not return phone calls today.